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Deteriorating standard?: A brief look into the English standard in Hong Kong

Abstract

There is a widely held belief that Hong Kong as a community is suffering from an ongoing decline in its standard of English. A very cursory search in the Internet directs readers to many articles lamenting the purportedly poor English standard of Hong Kong people. Appeals for Hong Kongers to improve their English are easy to find. These are often originated out of concerns over the unwelcoming possibility of losing out to their close economic competitors such as Singaporeans and their compatriots from China, owing to the importance of English in international trade and communication. However, through reviewing publicly available data, this article reveals that the critique directed at Hong Kong people's English standard does not always hold up against scrutiny. This article aims to demythologise the issue and points readers' attention to the possibility of an emergence of new standard which helps perform important sociolinguistic functions in the Hong Kong society.

Keywords: Hong Kong English, English proficiency, deteriorating standard, prescriptivism, sociolinguistic variation, sociolinguistic function, bilingual identity

1. Introduction

It is no difficult task finding an article or a casual read that comments on Hong Kong's English standard. Readers can simply type *Hong Kong English standard* into Google, quite a few articles about exactly that will come up in the search result. Three of the top five links that appear on my screen as I perform this search are related to the standard of English in Hong Kong (HK); to be more precise, these are articles published between 2012 and 2013 expressing concerns over the English standard of HK citizens. The titles of them are as follows: *Hong Kong's English language skills branded 'pathetic' as Chinese has 'negative influence'* (Zhao 2013), *Hong Kong trails rival Singapore in students' English skills* (Yeung 2013), and *Declining English standard hurts HK* (Fung 2012). Differing in their emotional appeal, these articles share a common theme related to the declining English proficiency and their concern over HK's competitiveness relative to other regional economic competitors such as Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan. Other commentaries, debates and the like sometimes direct their criticisms at, but not limited to, HK English speakers' limited vocabulary repertoire and hence their reliance on 'translation' of vocabularies or phrases from Chinese or Cantonese such as, *add oil* (which is a phrase said to encourage hard-work, the closest English equivalent being *keep fighting*), *blow water* (chit-chat), *long time*

no see,¹ etc.

Apart from newspaper articles or editorials, there are also occasional TV programmes on the matter being broadcasted. The TV program aired in mid June 2011 (Sunday Report) featuring Hong Kong English highlights some of the many criticisms against this variety of English is a good case in point. In addition to the lack of vocabularies mentioned above, critics target other features which are often linked to the idiosyncratic usage of grammar, e.g. *You very like it* (You like it very much), lexes/ vocabularies/ phrases, e.g. *add oil*, and pronunciations, e.g. pronouncing all vowels as full-vowels (i.e. non-reduction) in multi-syllabic words.² Not only are these features claimed to be 'illogical' and contribute to issues of intelligibility, they are also taken as evidence to support the claim that English proficiencies are running downhill among many in HK. These sentiments are shared among the general public, perhaps more particularly among the more educated ones. They are often frightened by the possibility of other regional players, including compatriots from China, overtaking HK people in terms of English proficiency. This, they believe, will consequently cost HK's status as an international financial hub.

These self-critiques are not new, they have in fact lived through generations among language prescriptivists and English language teachers in HK (see Bolton, 2002b).³ Although these claims pertaining to HK people's level of English are not completely unfounded, further inspection uncovers potential flaws in the data on which these claims are based. This article, therefore, aims to unpick the situation through reviewing publicly available data from the International English Language Testing System's (IELTS) test-taker performance reports, the results from the Common English Proficiency Assessment Scheme (CEPAS), TOFEL iBT test and scores data, and government reports. At the same time, the article hopes to add another layer of understanding to the seeming deterioration in English standard among HK's population by pointing out that these comments often disregarded the wide array of extra-linguistic functions that the 'wrong translations' perform. It also aims to question the notion of 'correctness' regarding English when regional variations clearly prevail even in native contexts (e.g. UK and US). It also hopes to point out the importance and relevance of concepts such as identity and linguistic innovation when discussing the matter of English proficiency. The remainder of this article provides a brief background of English in Hong Kong. It then proceeds to discuss and

¹ It will be pointed out in section three that *long time no see* does exist in first language English.

² In many native speakers' varieties of English, vowels in unstressed position are often weakened to a schwa.

³ Prescriptivists prescribe what they think 'is the correct way of saying or writing something' instead of describing the actual usage of speakers and writers of the language (Brown and Miller, 2013: 356; cf. descriptive grammar).

problematise the notion of correctness. Following that, concepts such as stylistic variation, linguistic innovation, and identity will be used to highlight the potential sociolinguistic functions that HK English performs. The article will end by offering some concluding remarks prompting a rethink of the so-called 'deteriorating standard'.

2. English in Hong Kong

English as an international language has been important in HK even before it was colonised by Britain in 1842 (Bolton, 2000). HK English in its early days developed very much parallel to other pidgins as a result of trade with English speaking foreigners (see e.g. Lefebvre, 2004). Due to its limited and specific functions, there was no need for the development of complex structures or vocabularies beyond what is necessary for trade. In fact, one can still find traces of such vocabularies with localised pronunciation in many Chinese Almanac (better known as *Tung Shing* among Chinese), which is basically a calendar with all sorts of information such as zodiac, fortune telling, and for our purpose the adapted pronunciations of essential words for doing business with westerners (Wenweipo, 2006). An example of such a page can be found in diagram 1, where the Chinese given is the approximation of the English pronunciation. However, as HK takes on the role of an important trading port in Asia and the gateway to China, more people realise the importance of learning English. It has hence been introduced to the curriculum of formal education (So, 1992). Although the government's support and emphasis on the importance of English has somewhat shifted since HK's sovereignty was returned to China in 1997, placing a heavier focus on the development of Mandarin, concurrently reducing the number of primary and secondary schools educating in English which resulted in public outcries (Bolton, 2011; Evans, 2013), English remains one of the official languages alongside Chinese, a compulsory subject in HK's curriculum as well as the official medium of education in all public universities.

[insert diagram 1 here]

At this point in time, HK English has developed its unique features with regard to all aspects of the language; some of these characteristics are opaque to speakers of other English varieties. For instance, local vocabularies have been coined and widely used e.g. *Category III movie* (adult/ R-rated movie), *the sandwich class* (the squeezed middle class) (see Benson, 2000; Evans 2015). There are also distinctive grammatical features vis-à-vis finiteness (see Gisborne, 2009) as well as specific pronunciation features such as the non-reduction of unstressed vowels noted in the introduction

(e.g. Hung, 2000; Sewell & Chan, 2010). However, despite the many recent scholarly works published in the academic world (see Bolton, 2002a; McArthur, 2002; Setter, Wong & Chan, 2010 *inter alia*), this form of English has only received a marginal degree of acceptance among the public. This is a situation that resembles the emerging stage of many outer circle varieties of English (Kachru, 1992), for instance, Singaporean English, and Indian English.⁴ At its inception, a new variety of English is often associated with the falling standard among speakers compared to native speakers' norm (Schneider, 2007). Depending on the degree of acceptance within the local community, the variety will receive support or will be condemned. In fact, unless a variety is recognised and accepted as a model, it would not acquire a status in its own community (Kachru, 1983). As previously alluded to, HK is notorious for its complaint tradition with local educationalists and elites being highly critical of people's English proficiency (see Bolton, 2002b; also Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008).

Irrespective of local acceptance towards the HK variety of English, there is undeniable linguistic evidence of its systematicity with respect to various aspects mentioned above (i.e. vocabularies, grammar, and pronunciations). In fact, the underlying system of such English cannot be associated with first language transfer alone. Without delving into details, the example of *He saying something* (He is saying something) is not necessarily an 'error' that is uniquely made by HK learners, the missing of auxiliary *be* is a prevalent feature among other learners of English such as Spanish and Japanese learners too (e.g. Stauble, 1984; see also Hawkins, 2001). Indeed research has demonstrated convincingly that errors in second language acquisition (including the acquisition of English as a second language) are not caused solely by first language influence. The fact that learners from different language background go through similar developmental stages when they are acquiring English is taken to be strong evidence to support such a claim (Dulay & Burt, 1974). It is therefore difficult to resort to arguments which account for Hong Kongers' English by putting blame on Cantonese (the community language in HK) transfer alone.

2.1 The purported decline of English standard

Let us switch our attention to the evidence of the 'decline' in the standard of English among HK citizens. Besides relying on anecdotal evidence, some critics/ writers refer to the *Education First's English Proficiency Index* (EF's EPI).⁵ The EPI is an index of people's English proficiency as determined by the entry placement test who

⁴ Kachru's concentric circles of World Englishes define inner circle varieties as native speakers' English, the outer circle varieties as varieties used in places where English is spoken as a second language, while the expanding circle varieties can be conceived as varieties exist in places where English is taught as a foreign language.

⁵ Education First is a private institution offering English courses in multiple countries across the world.

participants take before they enroll in one of EF's English courses. These tests are also open to members of the public who are interested in testing their own levels of English. In November 2013, EF published findings based on tests taken by 750,000 adults from 60 countries in 2012 (Chen 2013). Hong Kong was deemed a place of 'moderate proficiency' with an average score of 53.34, ranking 22 among the 60 countries. This places them above South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China (Yu 2014). However, in the latest EPI findings based on data from 750,000 adults in 63 countries in 2013, although still regarded as a place of moderate proficiency, HK's rank has dropped to 31 with a score of 52.50, trailing the abovementioned counterparts except China.⁶ Further analysis unveils the fact that HK has actually fallen behind specific cities in China including Shanghai and Beijing. These reports have sparked renewed debates on English standard in HK and prompted further condemnation (Apple Daily, 2013; Sing Tao Daily, 2014).

On the surface, this perhaps looks alarming, but, further unpicking exposes issues with the findings. First of all, the test is based on a voluntary sample, so at best these findings are only a reflection of the proficiency of the specific sample who took the test. Second, without knowing the respective proportion of the general public who participated in the test and test takers who did it to fulfill enrollment requirement, it is hard to determine the validity of the results. This is mainly because one could argue that learners who wish to enroll in an English course are learners who see the need to improve their English, hence if the sample is heavily skewed towards them, the resulting data could be negatively affected by those who are perhaps less proficient. More proficient users of English by nature might not enroll in such a course in the first place.⁷ Moreover, there is no limitation over the number of times which any individual can take the test. Even if one was to overlook the data validity issue, careful inspection would show that Hong Kong's average is still above the regional average of Asia which is 52.21. As a matter of fact HK, on average, fares better than the Latin American region which scored 48.27, the Middle East and North African region which scored 41.82. HK only did worse than Europe as a whole which has an average score of 56.92. Even though there is no hiding from the fact that HK does trail behind another close economic rival, Singapore, which scored 59.58 in EF's EPI, a comparison with Singapore which has approximately 32% of its population that speaks English as a first language (Department of Statistics Singapore 2011) seems unfair. This is because unlike Singapore, the majority (90%) of the HK population speaks Cantonese as their mother tongue (Social Surveys Section, Census

⁶ <http://www.ef.co.uk/epi/>

⁷ One should also bear in mind the fact that there are potential conflicts of interests in the sense that creating some form of awareness/ anxiety among the public might have financial implications for companies such as EF which provide English enhancement courses.

and Statistics Department, 2013). Being viewed from such perspective, the data seems to portray a less worrying picture

On the other hand, a comparison with the IELTS data suggests that the test takers' performance have remained rather stable in recent years. As can be seen from table 1, the scores of Hong Kongers who took the academic version of test remain more or less the same between 2009 (6.36/ 9.0) and 2013 (6.4/ 9.0). Similarly, the scores obtained by those who took the general training version of the test only fluctuated slightly from 6.23 in 2009 to 6.3 in 2013. At the same time, its relative rank has mostly remained in the upper third region among the countries where data is available (table 1). Crucially, on no occasion has HK been ranked lower than the same countries mentioned above, namely South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China which are suggested to have surpassed HK in EF's EPI. Obviously, the same caveat regarding sample generalisability still holds, but these data do indicate that instead of a drop in standard, the English proficiency of the HK population seems to have remained more or less constant.

[Insert tables 1 & 2 here]

For the sake of triangulation, another source of data from the Common English Proficiency Assessment Scheme (CEPAS) is also reported here. The CEPAS scheme promotes IELTS by providing incentives to final year university students in HK to take the IELTS before they graduate through reimbursing their fee. Test results by these students are tallied and published as press release annually.⁸ Results in table 3 once again show that these students' English proficiency as indicated by the scores they obtained in IELTS remains constant by and large with the average score by the 2009 cohort being 6.69, and that by the 2012 cohort being 6.70. Furthermore, the results from a less commonly taken test in the HK context, TOFEL iBT seem to provide support for this general trend (see table 3). The average score among test takers in 2007 was 80 – ranking 76 out of 155 countries or regions where data is available, while it was 83 in 2013 – ranking 79 out of 166 countries or regions where data is available.

[insert tables 3 & 4 here]

On the other hand, census data also shows that the percentage of population claiming to know English rose from 6.3 % in 1931 to 43.0% in 2001 (Bolton, 2002c: 34). The latest *Thematic Household Survey Report No. 51* published by the HK

⁸ <http://www.ugccepa.com/200708/press.asp>

government in May 2013 further indicates that among the 10,000 households surveyed, 82.6% of them reported possessing at least some command of the English language (Social Surveys Section, Census and Statistics Department, 2013).

Viewing all these data together seems to indicate that the general belief of a downhill trend cannot be substantiated. If anything they suggest that the level of English, at least among the people sampled, seem to have remained constant even in a relatively consecutive reading.

3. The notion of correctness, dialectal variation, and language change

So if the claim of a drop in proficiency is put into question after considering extra data, what are the other potential arguments that critics can fall back on? Some of the critics, especially those who embrace the prescriptivist's tradition build their arguments on the fact that English in many non-native regions including Hong Kong are different from the native varieties. Although it may be the case that features found in HK English differ to an extent from the native speakers' norms as previously discussed, defining correctness is a problematic issue in itself. Variations seen in British and American English are a good illustration of this point. Readers who are familiar with both varieties of English are aware that British English and American English differ from one another not only in vocabularies, e.g. *biscuits* vs *crackers*, and spelling, e.g. *grey* vs *gray*, they also vary in other subtle grammatical aspects including verbal inflections, e.g. *What has **got** into you?* vs *What has **gotten** into you?*, and past tense marking e.g. *learnt* vs *learned*. These, among numerous other examples, demonstrate that even within the inner-circle varieties there are linguistic variations that differentiate one variety from another. In view of that, the question as to how one defines 'correct' remains a perplexing issue. Do we teach the standard British English (allegedly characterised by Received Pronunciation) to learners in HK? Perhaps that would be a fair model to aspire to considering the historical link HK has with the UK (Bolton, 2000). Yet, as Hughes, Trudgill, & Watt (2012:1) put it,

'When foreign learners of English first come to the British Isles, they are usually surprised, and often dismayed, to discover how little they understand of the English they hear ... the English most British or Irish people speak seems to be different in many ways from the English the visitor has learned. While it is probably differences of pronunciation that will immediately strike them, learners may also notice differences of grammar and vocabulary.'

So even if one was to choose British English as the model, problems of regional variations still abound (Beal, 2006; Hughes et al., 2012).

Apart from the difficulty in choosing one specific norm to adhere to, it is also interesting to note that many of the 'golden rules', at least regarded as such by many, originated from no more than arbitrary personal preference and idiosyncrasy without linguistic foundations (Aitchison, 2001). The widely held view of 'do not end a sentence with a preposition' is a case in point. In his book, *A short introduction to English grammar*, Robert Lowth (1762/ 1967), a then prominent Bishop of London, 'set out to put matters right by laying down "rules", which were often based on currently fashionable or even personal stylistic preferences' (Aitchison, 2001:11). He wrote, in contrary to the general usage, the following,

'The Preposition is often separated from the Relative which it governs, and joined to the verb at the end of the Sentence . . . as, "Horace is an author, whom I am much delighted with" . . . **This is an Idiom which our language is strongly inclined to; it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style of writing;** but the placing of the Preposition before the Relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous; and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated style.' (Lowth, 1762/1967: 127–8.) [emphasis added]

and hence the rule of thumb of 'never end a sentence with a preposition'. As a matter of fact, when one comes to think about it objectively there are really no grammatical underpinnings that make *He was the one to whom I talked* in any way more correct than *He was the one who I talked to*. Such a difference is perhaps more of a stylistic issue than a grammatical one.⁹ Whereas the first sentence is more likely to appear in a formal discourse, the latter is common in daily conversations. Likewise, claiming *long time no see* makes no sense to native English speakers is no more than a reflection of personal preference as its existence is first documented in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1900.¹⁰

Yet, some others would resort to history in their definition of correctness. Accuracy in such terms is usually understood as things that we are used to saying and norms that have a long history. This line of argument is again hard to sustain, bearing in mind that language is very much evolving through time (Yule, 2014) and that linguistic innovations are commonplace. Sentence structures can change over time just as meaning of words can alter. For instance, we used to be able to say *I know not* (I do not know), which is a line that appeared in *Hamlet*, in Early Modern English/ Shakespearean English (e.g. Baugh & Cable 1993; Singh 2005). However, in present day English similar constructions would sound incredibly archaic if not wrong. This is

⁹ The notion of stylistic variation will be addressed in more detail in section 4.

¹⁰ <http://oed.com/view/Entry/109975?redirectedFrom=long%20time%20no%20see#eid38785516>

due to the fact that in present day English the main verb can no longer be raised passed the negator, hence *do*-support is required. This restriction in turn has an effect on word order. Another example that goes against the argument that is based on history has to do with the word *you*. In Old English there used to be a distinction between singular and plural *you*.¹¹ This distinction between *you* and *youse* is still found in some dialects of English in the United Kingdom, for example in Liverpool and Northumberland (Hughes et al. 2012). Are we ready to say that since these varieties are more faithful to English of older days, they are the only correct model that should be followed? Another example with respect to the change of word meaning is illustrative of the overarching point being made in this section. The word *gay* used to mean noble, beautiful, excellent, fine, and etc; the first example of this usage was documented in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1325.¹² The more commonly used meaning of this word nowadays, however, relates to homosexuality which is a meaning that only emerged in early 1920s. This is again an example showing how language can change through time, in this case, a word acquiring extra meaning.

All the above demonstrate that the notion of correctness is problematic given the presence of dialect variation and the historical development that English has undergone through the years. In this respect, claiming that the English standard of HK speakers (and in fact many other outer circle variety speakers) has been deteriorating is perhaps over-assertive if not dogmatic. It is true that HK English contains aspects that are different from other varieties including the 'standard' varieties, but differences between varieties have always existed even in native/inner-circle varieties as discussed above. In fact, many of these 'deviant' usages are performing important extra-/ socio- linguistic functions as will be argued in the following section.

4. Stylistic variation, linguistic innovation, and identity

The language we use can vary from context to context; for instance, it is unlikely that one would use *What's up bro* when greeting his or her boss, the more formal form of *Good morning Mr. Johnson* is the likely utterance in such an occasion. This stylistic variation allows us to denote formality in a continuum. A speaker essentially locates him/ herself along such a continuum and subsequently chooses the linguistic form to produce according to ways s/he deems appropriate for a given situation. At different ends of the formality continuum, there is generally a different degree of acceptance

¹¹ Though the form is quite different from their present days' counterparts; there was also the distinction of case which also alter the surface form of the word *you*.

¹² <http://oed.com/search?searchType=dictionary&q=gay>

as to what language should be used. Going back to the above example, the reason why *What's up bro* is highly unlikely to occur is because the situation of greeting a superior calls for a formal register. That said, if the boss and the employee are very close friends who just happen to work in the same workplace, then *What's up bro* would probably sound less awkward. A formal context generally demands a more conservative and careful use of language (Labov, 1966/ 2006), while an informal context facilitates word play and innovative use of language. Fishman's article of *Who speaks what language to whom and when* (1965) highlights that linguistic choice is not a random act at all, just as it was no coincidence that an employee greets his boss with *Good Morning Mr. Johnson*. This again relates to the notion of accuracies, perhaps more aptly put, the appropriateness as delineated by the socially accepted norm.

Indeed when a person speaks, it is not merely the content that matters, but the implications, and its intended effect (both linguistic and extra linguistic) all contribute to the act of uttering a sentence. Furthermore, Le page (1986:24) has argued that

'linguistic behaviour depends upon seeing language primarily not in its communicative functions but as a vehicle - the major vehicle - through which we make acts of identity, project ourselves upon others, represent in words our positions in the universes we each create in our minds. The images we cast with language may themselves be sharply focused or more diffuse; they may coincide with those cast by others, or they may not. If they are diffuse, or, if they do not match those of others, we have the choice of focusing them so as to be more sharply defined, or so as to coincide more with those cast by others, or we may refrain from focusing in either sense - due either to our inability to do so or our lack of motivation to do so.'

That is to say when one tries to understand an act of speaking, one has to look beyond the surface language in order to be able to truly appreciate the whole array of intended subtext as well as speaker's intention to signify extra-linguistic information such as identity, orientation towards the interlocutor, and etc. Applying to the case of HK speakers of English, the use of innovative phrases and words such as *add oil*, *blow water* can indeed be interpreted as performing multiple functions as will be elaborated below. It should be pointed out that a related issue of nativisation and localisation is an interesting one. However, since this is not the focus of the current paper, this issue will not be dealt with in any detail. Readers interested on the topic can refer to Zhang (2014) and other references mentioned in section 2.

The use of these items not only creates a dramatic effect, it also positions the

speaker as a HK bilingual who understands the meaning of these vocabularies. The speaker is hence able to assert a unique identity, a HK bilingual, through the use of this playful language. At the same time, this very act enables them to differentiate themselves from outsiders who do not share these linguistic devices or lack these items in their linguistic repertoire (Ho, 2008). In other words, this innovative use of language can in fact be performing important functions such as signaling trendiness, showing empathy, and demarcating group membership and excluding outsiders who do not belong to their speech community.¹³ We can find other linguistic variables functioning similarly in other contexts as well in relation to factors such as age and gender. Examples include the use of quotatives, *be like*, and *go* by speakers of different age in sentences such as, *I'm like 'urgh' you know* (Buchstaller 2006b: 362), *She'll go 'get me a cup of tea I've been at work all day'* (Buchstaller 2006a: 4); different use of *-ing* or *-in* variable for the pronunciation of *-ing* word endings in Norwich among speakers of different gender and different class (Trudgill 1974); and the use of non-standard verb forms such as *They calls*, and *I knows* (Cheshire, 1978, 1982) by youngsters in Reading (see Eckert and Rickford 2001 for more on sociolinguistic variations). Therefore, treating the use of innovative English phrases by HK speakers as errors (in the prescriptive sense) is to disregard the multiple important extra-linguistic functions that they perform (cf. Bolton and Kwok 1990). Admittedly, it would perhaps be stretching it too far to claim that phrases such as *add oil*, and *blow water* are 'good' English that can be comprehended by everyone, however, when they are used in the appropriate context (e.g. in informal conversations among local friends) should not be taken as evidence to support claims that the English standard is falling among HK's speakers.

One could possibly argue that such idiosyncratic use of language will contribute to the problem of intelligibility, comprehensibility and hence communication will be compromised when these features are used with English speakers who do not share such knowledge. Nonetheless, such concerns are perhaps wrongly placed, at least in the given context, when one comes to understand that one of the purposes of these localised vocabularies, like other slangs, is to create a certain degree of discreteness. It is also worthwhile to bear in mind that the intelligibility of HK English based on the small speech sample compiled by Kirkpatrick, Deterding & Wong seems to be highly intelligible in international settings and contexts (2008). Though the generalisability of the results, as noted by the authors, still needs to be tested in a wider context involving listeners from other places such as continental Europe and Africa, this does pose potential challenges to the arguments by critics of HK English or criticisms on

¹³ Related to this discussion is the fact that code-mixing of Cantonese and English has been argued to form part of HK speaker's identity (Joseph 2004).

Hong Kongers' English standard.

5. Concluding remarks

This article has briefly noted some background information about English in HK and has reviewed evidence which challenges the claim that Hong Kong people's English ability is on a decline. The paper has also tried to grapple with the knotty notion of correctness and in turn problematised the concept with arguments related to historical and language change. The final section has synthesised issues raised in relation to sociolinguistic constructs of variation, and identity. Through these discussions, it is highlighted that viewing English as a monolithic entity with 'one and only one' standard is not without its problems, especially when all forms of variations clearly exist in native and non-native contexts alike.

Triangulating data from the various sources reveal that, contrary to popular belief, the English proficiency among the HK population seems to have remained more or less stable. This reminds us that making impressionistic and emotional claims without adequate empirical support can sometimes lead to misguided conclusions. Moreover, using the purported deteriorating English standard among HK people as a case study, this article hopes to have drawn readers' attention to the fact that various linguistic forms, be it different from native speaker norm or not, are performing highly intricate functions that are more than merely a 'catch the eye' communicative act. While we endeavor to define and understand English in different terms, the aspect of English use, or in fact, language use to signal identity and other extra-linguistic elements should not be ignored. Throughout the article, it has been maintained that English proficiency is not a concept that can be easily defined not only because of the variation present in both native and non-native contexts, but also because of the ongoing evolvement and change that the language goes through. Questions such as 'What norm of reference are we using to view speaker's English proficiency?', 'Is it fair to view a non-native speaker's English proficiency in native speaker terms?', 'Is it realistic to expect non-native speakers to acquire native speaker's English when the input they obtained do not represent such a norm?', and perhaps even more fundamentally 'How should proficiency be defined? Is it the ability to communicate or the ability to produce "textbook-like" utterances?' have to be asked and carefully thought through before we can thoroughly address the issue of proficiencies. At the same time, the presence of unique or idiosyncratic features of HK English should not be taken as the unequivocal evidence of a decline in English standard among the population as they can be and are performing unique functions that cannot be achieved otherwise including signaling a Hong Kong bilingual identity.

Clearly, issues that have been referred to in this short piece of writing are very

much open to debate. It is perhaps everything but impossible to draw a conclusion on the issue of English standard among non-native speakers at this point when non-native speakers of English have outnumbered native English speakers by a fairly large margin (Crystal, 2008). In such a context, it is almost certain that English as an international language/ a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2011) will continue to evolve and hence the norm reference according to which learners are judged is also likely to alter (cf. Schneider, 2014). Related to that, given the ever rising number of speakers who speak English as a non-native tongue, it is perhaps appropriate to ask whether non-native speakers should continue to take sole responsibility in ensuring successful communications between different interlocutors by means of trying to 'perfect' their English or 'imitate' the native model as best as they can; all users of English should perhaps try to acquaint themselves with various international varieties so as to enhance English communications. In all, it is hoped that this article along with many other contributions on the topic of English and English usage will continue to stimulate discussions and fuel insightful research.

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Diagrams and tables

墨水	Ink 英忌	筆	Pen 胼	紙	Paper 披頗
鉛筆	Pencil 胼士路	床	Bed 必	枱	Table 爹步
衣櫃	Wardrobe 窩都笠	櫈	Bench 濱治	椅	Chairs 車士
帽	Hat 乞	傢俬	Furniture 科覓查	餐枱	Dining table 低寧地布
被	Quilt 虧要路	毛氈	Blanket 布靚揭	蓆	Mat 乜
枱布	Table – cloth 地布夫羅夫	衣服	Cloth 曲路士	帳簾	Curtain 吉頓
襯衫	Shirt 恤	外衣	Coat 曲	西裝	Foreign dress 科倫都哩士
領呔	Meck tie 覓忒	衫	Waist Woolen Sweater 烏倫士屈他		
襪	Stockings 士托頓士	鞋	Shoes 蘇士	褲	Trousers 去老叟斯

Diagram 1. Chinese approximation of English words pronunciation in Chinese Almanac¹⁴

¹⁴ Adapted from <http://forum4.hkgolden.com/view.aspx?type=EP&message=2635882>

Table 1. Hong Kong IELTS takers' performances¹⁵

	2009	2011	2012	2013
Academic (out of a maximum of 9)	6.36	6.4	6.3	6.4
General Training (out of a maximum of 9)	6.23	6.4	6.4	6.3

Table 2. Ranking of Hong Kong over the number of countries where IELTS data is available¹⁶

	2009	2011	2012	2013
Academic	11/ 40	11/ 41	16/ 40	9/ 39
General Training	14/ 40	9/ 39	13/ 40	12/ 39

Table 3. CEPAS takers' IELTS performances¹⁷

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Average score (out of a maximum of 9)	6.69	6.72	6.69	6.72	6.7

Table 4. Hong Kong TOEFL iBT takers' performances¹⁸

	2007	2009	2010	2013
Average score (out of a maximum of 120)	80	81	81	83

¹⁵ Data from: http://www.ielts.org/researchers/analysis_of_test_data.aspx

¹⁶ Data from: http://www.ielts.org/researchers/analysis_of_test_data.aspx

¹⁷ Data from: <http://www.ugcpepa.com/200708/press.asp>

¹⁸ Data from: https://www.ets.org/research/policy_research_reports/publications/report/2008/iHlf and http://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227_unlweb.pdf